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Critical Literacy, Common Core, and “Close Reading”

Aimee L. Papola

Teachers who support their students in critical literacy are helping them become open minded, actively engaged, analytical readers who go beyond the demands of the CCSS and become informed consumers of all texts. These students will have an understanding of multiple viewpoints, the ways in which text and language create power relations, and ways that literacy activities can lead to social justice issues and social action.

Across the United States, teachers from kindergarten through high school are being asked to implement a new set of standards—the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—in order to prepare our nation’s students to be “college and career ready” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010). Besides learning the language and demands of the standards, teachers are exposed to videos, professional development, and materials developed by groups and individuals suggesting ways they should shift their instruction to align to the expectations of the CCSS.

In addition to asking teachers to include more informational text in their classrooms and to focus on text-dependent questions, another common concept that inevitably comes up in conversations regarding the CCSS is the idea of close reading. Teacher resource books, professional development workshops, and even the Publishers’ Criteria associated with the standards (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) define and sell their approaches to this idea of close reading, touting their approach as “the way” to help students become analytical readers who can meet the demands of the Common Core. In the following sections, I propose that taking a critical literacy approach to texts can not only help students become “close readers,” but can move beyond the demands of the CCSS and support students in becoming informed, engaged, and empowered readers of the many texts they will encounter.

Defining Close Reading

Although “close reading” is not a part of the actual CCSS, it has become a significant concept and phrase associated with the new standards. The Revised Publishers’ Criteria (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) includes the term *close reading* throughout the document, resulting in teacher resources and textbook companies creating materials focused on this type of instructional approach. *Close reading* can be defined in a variety of ways. According to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC 2011), one of the organizations creating assessments for CCSS,

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining its meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. (p. 7)

Student Achievement Partners, an organization that develops materials to “support teachers” with implementing CCSS, offers passages with prewritten questions and multiple readings as the approach to close reading (Student Achievement Partners, n.d.). Both of these organizations offer a certain way to approach the concept of close

reading, with heavy emphasis on teacher-directed questioning and more focus on literal comprehension. However, this rereading of a text in order to answer questions is not the only approach to analytical, close reading.

Despite the new attention to close reading, it is, in fact, not a new concept. Literacy experts have been discussing careful and analytical approaches to texts for years, with strong ties to the significant work of Rosenblatt (1978) and her theories involving the transaction between the reader and text as a means to understanding what the author has to say. Many literacy experts offer a definition of close reading as an outcome to careful, purposeful rereading of worthy texts that ask readers to understand not just what the text says, but also how the text works, its connection to other texts, and what the text means through a variety of strategies (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Shanahan, 2013).

When considering all the definitions of close reading, it becomes evident that the key is careful, analytical reading of text. If teachers help students learn to read with a critical literacy lens, this analytical approach is inherent in the interaction with the text, as well as the development of a deeper awareness of sociocultural factors shaping readers and texts. In the following sections, I will share a brief background of critical literacy theory and how it can be directly linked with the idea of close reading and the Common Core State Standards

Background on Critical Literacy

Several key pedagogical principles of critical literacy can be agreed upon by the majority of critical literacy theorists and scholars. Most critical literacy theorists see language and literacy as political acts with ties to power relations in society. Literacy educators, under the lens of critical literacy, are charged with helping students develop skills that enable them to enact social change. These skills stem from essential principles of critical literacy theory, including examining the relationship of power through

Essential Principles of Critical Literacy Theory

1. Examining the relationship of power through language and text
2. Challenging the status quo
3. Deconstructing and reconstructing texts
4. Focusing on sociopolitical issues
5. Taking steps for social justice through action

Critical Literacy Questions

- Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced?
- Who is privileged and who is marginalized in the text?
- What does the author want us to think?
- How does the author use specific language to promote his or her beliefs?
- What action might you take based on what you have learned from the text?

(McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

language and text; challenging the status quo; deconstructing and reconstructing texts; focusing on sociopolitical issues; and taking steps for social justice through action (Comber, 2001; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1999; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010; Shannon, 1990).

Taking a critical literacy stance as a reader entails not only reading the words in the text but also understanding the sociocultural factors in which that text exists in order to examine the purpose of the text, rather than being manipulated by it (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). It is a lens through which readers view the text, helping to go beyond simplistic personal responses to examine ways that these responses have been socially constructed and shaped by their world (Jewett, 2007). In the following sections, I will examine specific anchor standards in the CCSS as well as the idea of close reading and link these to critical literacy strategies including interrogating multiple view-

points, questioning the text, and examining sociopolitical issues.

Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

According to Lewison et al. (2002), interrogating multiple viewpoints is a key tenet to critical literacy. Reading a variety of texts from multiple perspectives allows readers to gain a deeper insight on a topic or issue. This act helps readers see not only that the same topic can be viewed from several perspectives, but also that a single text can have multiple meanings depending on the reader’s experiences and viewpoints (Ciardiello, 2004). Examining texts—through reading or through writing—from a variety of perspectives poses a challenge to students to explore diverse positions and understandings, which will expand their own thinking and make the text under examination more complex (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

To connect this critical literacy tenet to the CCSS, teachers should examine anchor standard 9: “Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order

to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010). This directly relates to the idea of interrogating multiple viewpoints or perspectives. In the primary grades, teachers might read fractured fairy tales that offer multiple perspectives on the same familiar tale, told from a variety of characters’ points of view. Reading these stories to determine whose voice is represented requires careful and close reading, particularly when students are asked to question the language used by particular characters telling their version of a specific event. Students can ponder, through close analysis, how language changes when the tale is told from a different perspective. Students in upper grades can apply this tenet of critical literacy by gathering articles about a common current event topic from a wide range of news sources or blogs. By reading different sources with a critical lens, students can begin to understand how certain language and visuals can be used to manipulate readers and to assert the author’s intentions and beliefs. A brief reading of a text would not allow for such deep understanding—this activity is at the heart of close, analytical reading.

Reading a wide range of texts from multiple perspectives can be done in many classes across the content areas, including literature, social studies, science, and math (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Teachers could begin by taking a topic that is relevant to all students in the school, such as a rule about chewing gum in the classroom. The students could examine this issue from a variety of perspectives—the principal, the classroom teacher, students who concentrate better when chewing gum, students who are distracted by gum chewing, custodians at the school—in order to better understand the need for the rule and whose voices were represented when creating the rule. This introduction to taking on other perspectives can help students approach texts with a more global and diverse lens. Additionally, this approach can lead into wider analysis of a historical event in a social studies class from a range of perspectives. For example, the teacher might link this activity to studying the creation of the United States Constitution, asking students to question whose voices were represented in the creation of this document and whose perspectives were missing. Students also can examine newer laws that have been passed either locally or nationally, looking for different perspectives

These questions go way beyond the simple who, what, where, when, why format of questioning as suggested in the CCSS, but allow students to answer those same types of questions in the process.



that needed to be considered when establishing the purpose and need for the law, as well as reasons individuals might oppose the law. This is a great support to implementing key principles of CCSS in the classroom, with the increasing emphasis on disciplinary literacy.

Questioning a Text From a Critical Lens

Questioning the text is a skill built directly into the CCSS. For example, anchor standard 1 at the primary level (grades K–3) involves asking and answering questions about a text, with support in earliest grades and independently by grade 3 (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010). These questions are meant, according to CCSS, to be grounded deeply within the text at hand; however, these questions need not be only literal comprehension level questions to be considered “text dependent.”

A big part of critical literacy is this practice of questioning. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) share examples of many questions that can be applied to any text but that take a critical lens. Some examples of these types of questions include the following:

- Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced?
- Who is privileged and who is marginalized in the text?
- What does the author want us to think?
- How does the author use specific language to promote his or her beliefs?
- What action might you take based on what you have learned from the text?

These questions go way beyond the simple *who, what, where, when, why* format of questioning as suggested in the CCSS, but allow students to answer those same types of questions in the process.

Consider applying critical literacy based questioning by reading *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson (2001). In this story, two young girls—one Caucasian and one African American—are neighbors, separated by a literal fence. Their mothers tell the girls not to cross the fence, so the main characters decide to sit *on* the fence, and a friendship begins between the two. Students can be asked to analyze the text through a close reading by asking whose voice is heard and whose is missing, as well as what the author wants us to think after reading this book. These are critical literacy questions that allow students to interrogate a text at a deeper level, and consider the

embedded sociopolitical issues. Readers need to make inferences (also a significant part of anchor standard 1 in upper grades) to understand the setting of the story as well as the theme. In reading closely with this lens, students would undoubtedly be able to answer those explicit questions such as Who are the characters in the story?, How did the main characters change?, or Where does the story take place? However, they could ask and answer much more meaningful questions, such as What is the significance of the time period in which this story takes place?, How might the story be different or the same if told today?, or What does the fence represent? All of these questions are still *text-dependent*, as they require deep, analytical thinking about the text to be able to answer.

Disrupting the commonplace through questioning can occur across content areas as well. In a social studies classroom, students can apply critical literacy and questioning to challenge the author’s intent when writing political propaganda, or examine who is represented and who is marginalized in a variety of texts recounting a historical event, including primary sources. Careful examination of statistics and graphs in a math class requires a critically literate lens to empower students when consuming the information and avoid being manipulated by it. Teachers can also help students use questioning and critical literacy to explore the perspectives present in their textbooks, and the “hidden curriculum” that is often present in these texts.

Focus on Sociopolitical Issues

A significant part of critical literacy is examining texts of all kinds for systems of power. When readers take on this lens, they go beyond a personal reaction to a text and examine the sociocultural factors that contribute to shaping their personal reactions (Lewison et al., 2002). Proponents of the CCSS often discuss the idea of having students go past their surface-level responses or connections to a text, making this the ideal approach to close reading of text that supports the Common Core.

Teachers of all grades could consider Anthony Browne’s *Voices in the Park* (2001) as an anchor text for this approach to close reading. In this picture book, four characters’ perspectives are shared on one event—an afternoon at the local park. A surface-level reading might reflect a basic understanding that people see the same event in different ways (which is still a beneficial lesson for students beginning to understand the previously mentioned aspect of critical literacy, interrogating multiple perspectives). However, when teachers incorporate examination of sociopolitical issues into a close reading of this text, readers begin to notice socioeconomic factors such as unem-

Picture Books to Support Critical Literacy and Close Reading

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type

D. Cronin (2000). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Encounter

J. Yolen (1992). San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.

Faithful Elephants

Y. Tsuchiya (1988). New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Fly Away Home

E. Bunting (1991). New York: Clarion Books.

If a Bus Could Talk:

The Story of Rosa Parks

F. Ringgold (1999). New York: Scholastic.

The Other Side

J. Woodson (2001). New York: Putnam.

Something Beautiful

S.D. Wyeth (1998). New York: Doubleday.

Those Shoes

M. Boelts (2007). Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

Voices in the Park

A. Browne (1998). New York: DK Publishing.

The Wretched Stone

C. Van Allsburg (1991). New York: Houghton Mifflin.

ployment, class systems, and discrimination that are present within the text.

When teachers seek out texts that are worthy exemplars for close reading activities in the classroom, they can increase student engagement by examining the social issues that their students relate to, as opposed to selecting books only from a predetermined list that certain individuals have deemed appropriate. Lewison et al. (2002) worked with classroom teachers new to including critical literacy in their classrooms. One of those teachers was surprised at the increased interest and engagement her fifth graders had when reading texts that focused on social issues. Older students might take it further to the social action stage of critical literacy, where they look for opportunities in their own communities to challenge the status quo and take action against social injustice after closely deconstructing texts that relate to various issues.

Concluding Thoughts

Teachers who support their students in critical literacy are helping them become open minded, actively engaged, analytical readers who go beyond the demands of the CCSS and become informed consumers of all texts. These students will have an understanding of multiple viewpoints, the ways in which text and language create power relations, and ways that literacy activities can lead to social justice issues and social action. This not only helps students become “close readers” who can meet demands of the Common Core, but also empowered readers who can navigate a wide range of diverse texts with a critically literate lens.



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